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Moscow: The New Pharaohs

The world press follows a double standard in reporting on Soviet and U.S. embarrassments. Any misstep by the U.S. government, however trivial, attracts the withering glare of the media's spotlight. Yet the Soviets are allowed to operate in the shadows, safe from embarrassing publicity.

From time to time, therefore, I have tried to illuminate events on the dark side of the planet. Today, I want to focus on what should be the Kremlin's greatest humiliation: its hopeless dependence on slave labor to keep its economy from collapsing.

The whole Soviet system would be crushed under the weight of its ideological and bureaucratic baggage if it weren't for the enforced labor of millions of criminals and political prisoners in the work camps of the Gulag Archipelago.

Unfortunately, the West, through a combination of greed and naiveté, has been encouraging the ghastly slave-labor system for decades—by providing the markets and technology that keep the unworkable Soviet system afloat.

Soviet repression is currently being perpetuated by the West's enthusiastic export of high technology to the Soviet Union. This allows the Kremlin planners to forge ahead with their grandiose industrial and public works projects, which increase the need for more slave workers in the face of the nation's chronic labor shortage.

The sale of high-tech items for the natural gas pipeline from Siberia to Western Europe is compounded folly. When the pipeline is completed, it will earn billions in badly needed hard currency, thus permitting the Soviets to pay for their huge military machine and their foreign adventures.

It is a cruel irony that many of the Soviet Union's 4 million slave laborers are reportedly at work on the very pipeline project that will forge their chains even tighter.

My associates, Dale Van Atta and Michael Binstein, have investigated the Soviets' exploitation of slave labor. Over a period of several months, they have interviewed numerous U.S. officials and other experts on the subjects. They were given access to secret U.S. intelligence reports.

Their conclusion was grim: the use of forced labor in the Soviet Union will accelerate in the next five or six years.

As Alexander Solzhenitsyn chronicled it so memorably, the forced labor system reached its peak under Stalin. Millions of Soviet citizens were shipped off to prison camps in Siberia and arctic Russia, where they were literally worked to death.

After a decline immediately following Stalin's death, the number of prisoners began inching up again in Nikita Khrushchev's waning days. The threat of labor camp sentences was chiefly political, a club to keep dissidents under control. But in recent years Soviet administrators have come to realize that slave labor is now a necessity. Consider these vignettes compiled by the International Society for Human Rights from interviews with Russian exiles:

- Work quotas at a labor camp for women near the town of Kungur were eight times higher than in non-prison Soviet factories, according to Julia Vossenskaya, a 42-year-old poet who drew a two-year sentence for joining an independent writers' group. The camp, located near the pipeline route, housed more than 2,000 women in space built for 800.

She spent 12 hours a day sewing clothes for pipeline workers. "The women consider it a great misfortune to be situated near a 'Great Economic Project,'" she said, "for in Russia things are built the way the pyramids were—not so much with knowledge and technology, but with the use of hordes of slaves."

- On-the-job safety at the camps is minimal or nonexistent, according to several exiles. Machinery fails, fingers are severed, workers are blinded by drills and polishing machines that lack protective screens.

- Peter Bergman, 62, was sentenced in the late 1970s for trying to emigrate to Israel. He was taken in handcuffs by helicopter to a camp at Tymen, also on the pipeline route. He learned that defying camp regulations or even failing to meet the production quota brought beatings, hunger rations and solitary confinement.

Despite myriad firsthand accounts, West European governments, eager to get Siberian natural gas, have demanded proof that slave laborers are working on the pipeline. In fact, the CIA and State Department have indisputable evidence that 90 to 100 prison camps are close to the pipeline route. Logically, they must be supplying at least some services or direct labor for the project.

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